

"Dusty Bibles . . . "  
A Sermon delivered at  
The First Universalist Society  
Central Square NY  
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July 1, 2018

The original stimulus for this sermon was one of those church bulletin board mini-sermons that I saw some time ago. It said something to the effect that "Dirty Minds are caused by dusty Bibles."

[civil religion]

There is, in America, what some scholars have called a "civil religion." It's a kind of lowest common denominator Protestantism that enables people who may not have been in any church for years, except for weddings and funerals, to say that they are acceptably religious. While a small percentage of those who, when asked their religion, label themselves "Protestant" mean that they have attended a variety of Protestant denominations and don't find the distinctions significant, I would suggest that the largest percentage of those who use that generic label are people who want to claim a religious affiliation, but do not attend any church. They "believe in God and Jesus and the Bible" because they know those are what "good people" are supposed to believe in, but don't push them hard as to what any of those mean to them because they have little idea. They are concepts rather than realities. Few of these people have ever touched a Bible, or if they have, they haven't opened it. (Perhaps they have a large, gold leaf edition of the Readers Digest Bible prominently displayed on their coffee table for all to see, but none to read.)

There are, of course, people who do read Bibles and take them very seriously - so seriously that there is a term Bibliolatry which refers to "excessive adherence to a literal interpretation of the Bible." - that is the turning of the book into an idol and worshiping it as if it were one.

[old story]

Do you know about the man who was walking along the street in front of a publisher's warehouse when he stopped to pick up a shiny object from the sidewalk - it proved to be a silver bullet? As he started to walk again, a case of Bibles fell out of a tenth story window and crashed into the sidewalk just ahead of him. He realized that, had he not stopped, he would have been at that precise spot when the Bibles hit and he would have been splattered across the sidewalk. That bullet saved him from being killed by those stray Bibles.

[The humor of that story comes from its variation on the old urban legend about the person whose life was saved from a stray bullet by a Bible carried in a chest pocket.]

[picking and choosing]

[Holding up a dictionary] In this book you will find the first and last word in response to every question you will ever ask. All you need to know is what order to put them in. It's a dictionary!

There are preachers who play that game -- who, by picking and choosing, by taking things out of context, or by distorted reinterpretations, can make the Bible say anything they want it to say. The Bible becomes the final authority for anything they want to sell. It is the panacea - "if everyone read the Bible regularly, we would have no crime and no drug abuse

and no spousal abuse and no pornography." I was delighted several years ago when I found a note card in the file left by my predecessor, Charles Parker Connolly, who served the Rockford congregation from 1913 to 1931. It reported:

*At a meeting of the International Congress of Psychology in New Haven in September 1929, Professor Hightower reported the results of an elaborate test of more than three thousand children. He showed definitely that the tendency of children to lie, cheat, and the like, was in direct proportion - NOT in inverse ratio - to their knowledge of the Bible and scriptural precepts. He concluded that: Mere knowledge of the Bible of itself is not sufficient to insure proper character attitudes.*

[religious liberals and the Bible]

Religious Liberals have a love-hate relationship with the Bible. Our spiritual ancestors were people who took the Bible very seriously. They took it so seriously that they read it, and they studied it, and they parsed its sentences, and they discovered that what it seemed to them to be saying was very different from what many other people read in it.

The brilliant young Spanish physician, Michael Servetus, who was born in 1511, studied the Bible and came to the conclusion that the concept of a three-personed God was not supported by the texts. He wrote a book "On The Errors of the Trinity" and was burned at the stake by John Calvin in his holy city of Geneva for his heresy. It wasn't that Servetus didn't read or revere the Bible - he did, and it served as his authority, and look what it got him.

Those who want others to read the Bible usually have an unstated subtext. "Read the Bible" really means, "Read the Bible and understand it as I understand it."

When William Ellery Channing brought Unitarianism out of the closet in 1819, with his sermon on Unitarian Christianity, he avowed that:

*Whatever doctrines seem to us to be clearly taught in the Scriptures, we receive without reserve or exception . . . This authority which we give to the Scriptures is a reason, we conceive, for studying them with particular care, and for inquiring anxiously into the principles of interpretation by which their true meaning may be ascertained . . .*

*Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for [people] in [human] language, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as other books.*

*We profess not to know a book which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible.*

Channing went on to suggest some of the things which would be impossible to reconcile, such as Jesus' alleged statement that he came to bring a sword not peace, and his command that his followers must hate father and mother. It was obvious to Channing and the Liberals of his time that the Bible was not all of a piece, and that some selection and interpretation were essential.

The problem is, once you start applying reason, where does it end? That is always the fear of the orthodox, and they are not wrong in worrying. The principles of Biblical criticism and scholarship which the Unitarians and Universalists of the 1800's endorsed became the meat and potatoes of mainline Protestant Christianity by this century. Most Lutheran, and Methodist, and Episcopal, and Presbyterian, and Baptist, and United Church, and Roman Catholic seminaries teach the same principles of interpretation that Channing and his successors articulated. The Bible, to be useful, must be understood in the context of its time,

and as containing principles, not simple rules that can blindly be extracted to apply in our times. That isn't always easy, but for many Jews and Christians, it is worth the effort.

Some of the feminist theologians and Bible scholars of today are convinced that they, finally, **really know** what the deity was trying to say through the imperfect pens of the male authors of the Scriptures. In many cases, I agree with their conclusions - but I take issue with their certainty that what they want to see is what was intended in a very different time.

The interesting thing about this trend in religion is that it has been accompanied by a decline in the churches -- or, that is, a decline in the liberal churches and concurrent growth in those churches which are willing to articulate Biblical inerrancy. It is not a pretty picture, but it appears a true one, that many people are more concerned with certainty than with rationality -- in fact, the more unreasonable the assertion, the more attractive it is to some people.

But, what about us? What attitude can we reasonably take to the Bible?

There have been times that Unitarian Universalists have been more literal minded about the Bible than the Evangelicals. Because we cannot believe every word or every idea found within its covers, out it goes. Bibliophobia is no more attractive, nor reasonable than Bibliolotry.

The existence of a culture means that there are certain fundamental ways of looking at the world which a people hold in common. While ours is a diverse culture, it is hardly debatable that the Bible contains the myths which are the lenses that affect our perceptions. It is a given that no one in this society can claim to be cultured if they are totally ignorant of the Bible.

We can go a step further - it is clear that the Bible contains myths and stories that many people find very rich ore to mine for insights into the human experience. The Bible addresses lust and greed and power, love and generosity and courage - justice and injustice, slavery and freedom, judgement and forgiveness. The Bible is a veritable inkblot which can help us find almost anything we are seeking. It has merit as literature alone, but that is only the start because its stories and language have a power ascribed to them that surpass the mere words.

Why then do so many religious liberals throw out the baby with the bath water?

Some Liberals have declared that there is simply too much wrong, too much old baggage, too much outdated science, too much paternalism, too much supernaturalism, to make the Bible worth the work it takes to extract the gold.

[quoting the Bible]

As Shakespeare pointed out long ago, in the Merchant of Venice, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." (To which I would add, and does, regularly.) And this is the immediate stimulus for this sermon.

In a speech to law enforcement officers in Fort Wayne, IN on June 14<sup>th</sup>, Attorney General Sessions, justified the breaking up of immigrant families by turning to the Bible. He said:

*Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. I would cite to you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.*

When asked her view of Sessions comment, Presidential Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who grew up in the home of a prominent minister, said, "It is very biblical to enforce the law."

[oops]

The reaction from across the religious spectrum was immediate and strong and very negative. It was pointed out that text of Paul's had not been quoted much since prior to the civil war when it was widely used to justify slavery, and then later by the Nazi's to urge support of their tyranny. Even Franklin Graham, Billy's son and a strong Trump supporter called Sessions use of the Bible "Disgraceful. It's terrible to see families ripped apart," he said. The spokesperson for the president's Evangelical Advisory Board said, "While Sessions may take the Bible seriously, in this situation he has demonstrated he is no theologian." In fact, more than 600 Methodist ministers and lay people have brought formal charges against Sessions for "numerous violations of the denomination's Book of Discipline, including child abuse, immorality, racial discrimination and, for his citation of Romans 13 to defend the policy, and the dissemination of doctrines contrary to the standards of the United Methodist Church."

Fr. James Martin, the Jesuit editor of America magazine said about Sessions misuse of the Bible':

[Sessions' is] taking a verse out of context. All of Paul is about how God's law supersedes human law. And so the last thing that the Bible should be used for is to justify sin. The whole thrust of the Old and the New Testaments when it comes to migrants and refugees and stranger is how we should care for them. In fact, Jesus uses that as a litmus test in terms of the last judgment. He says how we treat strangers is how we treat Jesus.

Ed Simon, author of the forthcoming book, **On Radical Faith and Post Religion**, pointed out:

*The Bible is a varied, complicated, and sometimes contradictory document, as one would expect from any text written by dozens of people, across centuries and cultures, and is subject to varying translations and interpretations. Yet for all of the differences of moral and theological nuances, it is strikingly unified when it comes to the question of how a stranger in our midst should be treated. Exodus 23:9 – "Do not oppress a foreigner." Leviticus 19:33-34 – "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them." Matthew 25:25-36 – "I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me."*

*Across the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, and the epistles, it is held that the immigrant, the refugee, and the stranger must be treated with compassion, as if they were our own brothers and sisters. This belief is a steadfast and perennial article in the Bible. Similar passages to the ones mentioned are found in Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, Malachi, 1 Kings, Job, Luke, Galatians, Corinthians, and among others. For being a remarkably ambiguous text in so many ways, its position on the treatment of immigrants is consistent.*

[The Poor People's Campaign]

Well, all that pushed me over the edge. I had been considering going to Washington last weekend to participate in the national gathering of *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, and the issue of the children ripped from their families removed

any reservations. I got on a bus in Syracuse at 2:00 Saturday morning and returned at 1am Sunday, which is how I happened to come to church here last Sunday for Andrea's wonderful sermon, which I saw as a building block for this sermon.

*The Poor People's Campaign, a National Call for Moral Revival* is an outgrowth of the Moral Monday campaign in North Carolina, begun five years ago by The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, and spread into many states. Dr. Barber was a speaker at our Association's General Assembly two years ago. Also two years ago, Mr. Barber, The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, and others began planning for a march which would celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Poor People's March on Washington which Martin Luther King organized but did not live to participate in because of his assassination.

The campaign began formally on Mother's Day and involved forty days of activities in some 40 states across the nation, culminating in the gathering in Washington last Sunday.

[the gathering]

I found participating in that gathering to be a moving religious experience, intellectually and emotionally. I have been suffering from the despair that many have been experiencing because of what I believe are the giant steps backwards in morality our government has been taking, and this experience compelled me to look at how I was responding in the face of what needs to be done to "Make America Good Again."

There are no estimates I could find of how many people were in Washington last week, but a roll call showed 40 states were represented and the crowd was diverse: economically, racially, sexually, occupationally, educationally, religiously, chronologically, and in any other way one can imagine. It is impossible to estimate from inside a crowd like that, but I can tell you that when we marched to the Capitol, the line was several blocks long. It certainly numbered in the thousands. The weather forecast had me worried: a 70% likelihood of thunderstorms Saturday afternoon. Our bus passed through several areas of heavy rain on our way down and the skies in DC looked threatening. It did, in fact, sprinkle for a couple of minutes, and then the sun came out! Some would say our gathering was blessed.

There was a program on the Mall from 10:00 until 1:00 when we were scheduled to march from the Mall to the Capitol. There were prayers and speakers and music. The opening prayer was sung and danced by a group from the San Carlos Apache Nation. A rabbi followed who read from the Koran. And then a Christian clergywoman read from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, and someone read from the Declaration of Independence, and an Imam read from Dr. King. Singers sang the old Spiritual, "I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom." [One of the singers had been of the SNCC Freedom Singers and sang at the march 50 years ago.]

Dr. Barber stressed that this gathering was not a commemoration but a commencing - it was the start of something new and important: a campaign to save the heart and soul of our nation. The philosophy of the campaign centers on the importance of change working from the bottom up and not from the top down. He quoted from the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, which probably dates from 600 years before the time of Jesus - he cited only a snippet, but verses 23-30 point with remarkable clarity to our present situation:

*The word of the Lord came to me: You are a land that is not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation. . . Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for [the politicians] saying, "Thus says the Lord God," when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the*

*land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and they have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land.*

Dr. Barber often speaks of the need for people to “stand in the breach.”

[five central concerns]

The bulk of the program was divided into the campaign’s four central areas of concern:

- \$ Systemic Racism
- \$ Systemic Poverty
- \$ Ecological Devastation, and
- \$ The War Economy,

all of which are linked. The people who spoke were not bigshots - heads of organizations. They only got to introduce the people who were personally experiencing the impact of these major concerns. They shared some statistics but mostly spoke from their personal experience to help us focus on the truths from which they suffer and with which they live on a daily basis.

The linkage of those concerns was illustrated by Liz Theoharis, the co-chair of the campaign who has written:

*If we explore the interconnection of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy and ecological devastation, we see how systemic racism allows us to deny the humanity of others; by denying the humanity of others, we are given permission to exploit or exclude people economically; by exploiting and excluding people economically, we are emboldened to abuse our military powers and, through violence and war, control resources; this quest for control of resources leads to the potential destruction of our entire ecosystem and everything living in it. And we see how the current moral narrative of our nation both justifies this cycle and distracts us from it.*

[confession]

While I consider myself, and most people who know me consider me to be pretty in touch with the issues of social justice, I have to acknowledge that the experience of the Poor People’s Campaign forced me to acknowledge that I have allowed myself to be distracted from addressing the magnitude of the issues of poverty in America today.

[Systemic Poverty]

Looking just at the Poor Peoples’ Moral Agenda section on Systemic Poverty, the reality is heart-wrenching! It points out:

*We challenge the idea that our economy rewards hard-working individuals and, therefore, if only the millions of people in poverty acted better, worked harder, complained less and prayed more, they would be lifted up and out of their miserable conditions.*

*Beginning in the 1970s, wages for the bottom 80 percent of workers have remained largely stagnant and today there are 64 million people working for less than \$15 an hour. Meanwhile, the top 1 percent’s share of the economy has nearly doubled to more than 20 percent of our national income. In 2017, the 400 wealthiest Americans owned more wealth than the bottom 64 percent of the entire U.S. population, or 204*

*million people. Just three individuals,[three individuals!] possessed a combined wealth of \$248.5 billion, an equal amount of wealth as the bottom 50 percent of the country.*

*Using the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which takes into account income as well as the costs of food, clothing, housing and utilities, and government programs that have assisted low-income families and individuals who are not otherwise designated as poor, 43.5 percent of the U.S. population — or 140 million people — were poor or low-income in 2016, including:*

*51.9 percent of children under the age of 18 (38.2 million children)*

*40.7 percent of adults between the ages of 18-64 (81.5 million adults)*

*42.5 percent of our elders over the age of 65 (20.8 million elders)*

*45 percent of women and girls (73.5 million people)*

*These include: 33.9 percent of White people (67.1 million people)*

*60.3 percent of Black people (25.9 million people)*

*65.1 percent of Latinx people (37.4 million people)*

*41.1 percent of Asian people (7.6 million people)*

The numbers have not been calculated for First Nations People.

That's a lot of numbers, and as I said, we were presented with some of the statistics and then the more moving stories from individuals who are part of these statistics.

[UN Report]

One June 21<sup>st</sup>, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations received a report on poverty in the United States which concluded:

*The United States already leads the developed world in income and wealth inequality, and it is now moving full steam ahead to make itself even more unequal. . . . High child and youth poverty rates perpetuate the intergenerational transmission of poverty very effectively, and ensure that the American dream is rapidly becoming the American illusion.*

It is no coincidence that our nation withdrew from the Council two days before the report was presented. We do not want to look at ourselves through the eyes of others.

[Andrea's sermon]

In her sermon in this pulpit last Sunday, "Egg or Stone," Andrea spoke of Norbert Capek, the Unitarian minister who created the flower communion and who went back to Czechoslovakia when the Nazi's were in control. She pointed out:

He chose to put himself in danger to defend fragile lives when other people wouldn't or couldn't recognize the danger to the Jews, the mentally ill, the disabled, the Roma people, people who were declared to be less than human and so, according to the Nazis, not entitled to anything, including life. What fragility in others, what danger to others, do we need to think about? Who are fragile in our country, in our time?

She later cited Michael Ignatieff's book, **The Ordinary Virtues** in which he wrote about how people had coped with disasters in their communities. She told us, "he chose 'resilience' as the relevant virtue" and pointed out "The key feature of a resilient material is elasticity. The

most resilient materials are alloys, combinations of elements acting together, rather than elements acting alone” . . [Ignatieff said that:]

*Resilience depends critically on institutions. A group of people, no matter how well meaning, cannot achieve much without the structure of a well-established institution. Institutions give shape to good intentions and allow a focus where resilience can flourish.*

Andrea pointed to churches as such institutions, noting:

*For many years, the institution of Church with a capital C, not just this church but the whole idea of Church, has been an important institution in our society. In its particular manifestations, it has not always been a wise or a benevolent institution. In its particular manifestations, it has often been so risk averse as to ignore many of the ills around it. It has been blind and smug, focused on individual shortcomings while turning away from the shortcomings of society as a whole. But it has also, in some of its manifestations, truly acted as the conscience of the nation, speaking out when it was not popular to do so on issues such as poverty, civil rights, and peace.*

To be clear, the focus of Andrea’s sermon was on being: .

*. . . generous with each other, generous with the mistakes and missteps that come with change. [She called us to be] willing to be each other’s support through the cracks and chips that come with growth. Those who began this church were willing to risk. We are their spiritual heirs. Let us go forward with the same sense of mission that brought this church here, a living, growing faith.*

#### **[My commitment]**

I have returned from the Poor Peoples’ Commencement committed to being a part of the Poor People’s Campaign’s “Moral Revival.” I will strive to remove my blinders and stop turning away from the immensity of the challenge we face. Dr. Barber’s followup email to the Washington event, points out:

*What makes this different from the typical voter registration and mobilization drive is we’re not a single issue effort gearing up for a particular election. We’re building deep infrastructure in the states to fight for long-term change. Forward together, not one step back.”*

There is a gathering this evening at 6:00 at the University Methodist Church in Syracuse to consider how local residents can work to address the challenges in this region. I have a commitment in Canton from which I cannot escape. I hope that some of you will be willing and able to participate in that meeting.

#### **[a challenge]**

My point is this: I believe we are called to blow the dust off our Bibles, Korans, Gitas, and other great records of the wisdom of the prophets, and to commit ourselves to actively seeking to create what Christians refer to as “the Kingdom of God” on this earth – a loving community in which none go hungry, or without shelter, or without the opportunity to live securely and fully. It is not an easy task, but it is one worthy of our devotion.